R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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THE RELATION BETWEEN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION AND INADEQUACY IN COLLEGE READING AND STUDY.

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PUB DATE DEC 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.48 10P.

DESCRIPTORS- *PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP, *READING SKILLS, *STUDY SKILLS, *GROUP THERAPY, *COLLEGE STUDENTS, PARENT ATTITUDES, PARENT INFLUENCE, PEER GROUPS, INTERACTION, STUDY HABITS, READING HABITS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS,

SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM TRANSCRIPTIONS OF GROUP THERAPY SESSIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS ATTENDING A VOLUNTARY, NONCREDIT, FREE COURSE ON READING AND STUDY SKILLS AT THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK ARE CITED. SEVEN TO TEN STUDENTS MET ONE HOUR EACH WEEK FOR 12 TO 30 WEEKS TO PARTICIPATE IN GROUP THERAPY. IT WAS OBSERVED THAT AT THE OUTSET THE STUDENTS ACCEPTED THEIR INADEQUACIES IN READING AND IN THE STUDY SKILLS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESS IN COLLEGE WORK. THIS FEELING GRADUALLY SHIFTED TO HOSTILITY TOWARD SCHOOL AUTHORITIES AND SCHOOL WORK. LATER, IT WAS EVIDENT THAT THESE FEELINGS WERE OUTWARD MANIFESTATIONS OF DEEPER PROBLEMS. SUCH AS FAULTY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS WHICH PERSISTED INTO EARLY ADULTHOOD. IT WAS OBSERVED THAT INTERACTION IN THE GROUP EFFECTED SOME CHANGES IN THE STUDENTS' FEELINGS AND GAVE NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE INTRA-FAMILIAL ORIGINS OF READING AND STUDY PROBLEMS. WHILE THESE OBSERVATIONS INDICATED THAT COLLEGE READING AND STUDY PROBLEMS COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO FAULTY PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION WHICH PERSISTED IN EARLY ADULTHOOD, FURTHER STUDY IS RECOMMENDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL CONGRESS OF THE INTER-AMERICAN SOCIETY OF PSYCHOLOGY (MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 18-23, 1967). (NS)

JAN 26 1968

ED016589

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Based on Excerpts from Group Therapy Sessions

Eleventh Annual Congress of the Inter-American Society of Psychology
Mexico City, Mexico, December 18 - 23, 1967

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Background and Purpose

The ability to read on a college level has two basic facets: skill development and emotional freedom to tackle learning dynamically.

Experience in conducting a voluntary, non credit, tuition-free Reading and Study Skills Course at the City College of New York strongly supports the thesis that college study problems are manifestations of emotional difficulties attributable frequently to faulty child-parent interactions which have persisted into late adolescence and early adulthood, assuming major importance in the persistent ruminations of the young people reporting these problems.

At the outset, students enrolling in the Reading and Study Course had stated their presenting problems in terms of inadequate skill, apparently unaware of underlying conflicts. Obsessive concern with

Parental attitudes came to the fore under the impact of peer probing in group therapy.

Two earlier papers dealt with the phenomenological psycho-dynamics of study problems as they emerged in these group sessions. (2, 3)

The present paper will focus on excerpts from the therapy sessions which gave insight into the intra-familial origins of reading and study problems. Etiological explanations as indicated by the students themselves are reported. Although an attempt is made to identify specific parent-child interactions as reported by this population, further study is necessary before generalizations are possible.

Sequential Phases in Group Discussion

As they entered the group situation from the Skills Laboratory, the students remained skills-oriented. During the earliest sessions, they spoke of their problems in terms of "reading too slowly"; "I have never been able to find main ideas"; "I do not see the organization of the material"; "It takes me too long to do homework".

In a second phase, they moved to an outpouring of hostility toward college, teachers, courses, and authority figures, blaming the college situation for their scholastic difficulties. They intellectualized complaints about theory-oriented courses which seemed to have no purpose or connection with their world. They described a sense of futility which settled over them as they tried to study irrelevant material in which they saw no possible application either to their lives or to their vocations.

A third phase developed as they concentrated their hostility on individual professors who were seen as remote and difficult to approach for discussion of problems, either personal or intellectual; they described a college world that was so cold and disinterested that it evoked alienation in them. This tendency to blame the instructors for remaining aloof and unapproachable appeared to involve transference to teachers of a hostility long fostered against original authority figures, namely parents.

A fourth phase shifted the focus of group discussion overtly to unsatisfactory, corrosive relationships with parents. Hostility, which appeared to have divers origins in the failure of early inter-personal relations with mother or father or both, was accompanied by aggression

and guilt. Whether or not the students' portrayal of these intra-familial situations was realistic, the neurotic effect appeared core to their study problems.

In summary, at the outset the most readily acknowledged anxieties focused on overt study habits: inability to concentrate, cramming, erratic study behavior, distractability and discomfort in class, as well as hostility against the instructional staff. Only later did it become evident that these concerns concealed deeper problems rooted in distorted parent-child relationships connected with

1) Father's unexplained criticism and disapproval,
2) Mother's advice rather than involvement,
3) Parents' stress on academic achievement,
4) Father's authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism,
5) Mother's continued infantilizing discipline,
6) Lack of communication between father and child,
7) Parents' need for child's achievement,
8) Reliance for self-esteem on parents' attitudes.

The excerpts cited in this paper were selected from transcripts of the sessions of groups,consisting of seven to ten members, which met one hour a week for twelve to thirty sessions each. The major criterion for selection was evidence in the students' own verbalization of a connection between his current inability to study effectively and the corrosive residue left from early childhood experiences. Space available imposed a limitation on the number of quotations reported.

Selected Excerpts

Father's Unexplained Criticism and Disapproval

Robert, a bright perceptive psychology major, expressed himself freely in the group.

"Essentially my problem is not a current one, but left over from my childhood. When I was younger, I got apprehensive at night about having to face a new day. I day-dreamed for a long time and got into a bad habit of not falling asleep because of fear of the new day.

"I feel that the reason is I felt I was criticized too much when I was younger.....

"I'm not overly sensitive to normal criticism today. But in early life, my father was a big bogey man. Mother over-protected me. My security was shattered by things my father did. He would rip my homework up and tell me to do it over again without saying why or what was wrong. I didn't understand why he did what he did. My memory is sparse about it... but nothing I did ever seemed to be acceptable to him.

"As a result, I was so bewildered I couldn't really mature. I did most of my growing up in the Army....But I still fantasy life in which people don't criticize me, a real Walter Mitty.

"Now, I still act as if I were afraid my father would rip up my work if I completed it. So I try to avoid coming to grips with the core of my work, as I once tried to avoid facing the new day through day-dreaming.

"I spend time on non-essential details. I have an obsession to waste time. I'll fix something that doesn't have to be fixed. Any opportunity for distraction I embrace with self-recrimination. I work better with friends around who have some affection for me...Without them, I remain anxiety-ridden about my work, but never get to doing it."

Mother's Advice Rather Than Involvement

Jean's problem as she reported it revolved around her mother. Her feelings of insecurity and hostility were complicated by guilt:

"I can't really concentrate on my work because I am so insecure. How can I be secure if I am insecure in my own mother's love? As long as I remember, I have hated my mother. To tell the truth, I hate the kind of person she is. She's always right; she's so competent; she knows everything. Now that I'm 21 she still tells me what to do and how to do it. But she never loved me. I have never felt any warmth from her. When I got my grades this year, I was very distressed. I looked to her for a little feeling, for sympathy.....But all she gave me was more advice about what to do about it. But I always wanted her love so much; it makes me feel guilty to say these things.

"I was always so insecure about her love that I am insecure about everything and everybody. I feel alone all the time, reaching out for a person to do things with. Even when I'm with people I'm alone. The loneliness is unbearable. I want a person with whom I can feel a mutuality of interest. But most of the time, it's just a question of having someone to sit with in the movies, to feel someone next to you....

"But this needing someone becomes a waste of time, prevents me from doing my work. I can't study with this hollow feeling of loneliness".

Parent's Stress on Academic Achievement

Alice too described loneliness as it affected her school work:

"I go all the way to Brooklyn where I live, an hour and a half trip. There is no connection with the college, no one to talk to about the work. Instead of getting down to my assignments, I wander around restlessly back and forth to the refrigerator, making telephone calls to some of the girls. No matter what I do, I feel so alone.....

"I feel my parents did this to me. They never really approved of me or gave me the feeling that I was wholly acceptable to them like my sister because she did so well in school.

"They left me always reaching out for acceptance, and unable to do my school work because everything they think of me depends on how well I do."

Father's Authoritarianism and Anti-intellectualism

Walter, the son of first generation German parents, talked of his hostility toward his father:

"No matter how hard I study I don't seem to be able to get good marks. Maybe it's because my father has never wanted me educated, or doesn't see the use in my going to college. It's a desperate necessity for me to prove that I can make it.

"If I fail, I'll be painting houses next to him for the rest of my life. He's against my going to school, and he forced me to work all summer to expiate my sin, to make up for not working during the school year.

"Do you know what it is to sandpaper a whole house, inside and out, to satisfy his requirements? It's a lot of work.

"I must make a go of it in school. I'm so tense about it that I can't read or study. I guess he always looked at me as a source of help to him; he's never said a kind word to me all my life long....I guess he never loved me. My mother is on my side. I don't know what I'd do without her".

Mother's Continued Infantilizing Discipline

To Harriet, academic failure was a means of striking out against her mother toward whom she felt resentful and hostile. She insisted on individual performance according to her own personal standards even if it meant losing prestige in everyone's eyes except her own.

"I worked like a dog during high school because this is what my mother wanted, and I wanted it then too. But now I feel I must do it without any work at all. I go for long walks with the crowd. I avoid doing my work. Of course, I'm here essentially to get an education. I truly want to learn as I did in high school. But I must do it my way now, and that way is without any work, just to show my mother that it can be done without killing myself.

"So you know what my mother still does to me? If a friend comes to visit, my mother calls up to her, 'Louise, don't you think it's time you went home? Harriet has to do her school work.' Do you know what that does to me? It shows me how little confidence she has in me, how little she respects me. No, even if it means I'll fail, I'll do it my way. I know it's spiting myself, but it has to be that way, or I'll bust."

Lack of Communication Between Father and Child

Leslie's feelings of rejection by his father had left the scars of a pattern of rejection which came into play whenever he entered a new situation or met new people:

"My father never said a kind word to me. We never had a real conversation in all my life that concerned us personally. I never even knew until very recently that I was half-Jewish.

"My father ordered me around, and I did what he said. He never praised me for anything I did. He never asked me questions about school or friends. He never showed one minute's interest in all of my 19 years of life.

"Now, I see him starting to push my little brother around, and I can't stand it. I'll get out of the house as soon as I can, because I can't bear to see the pattern repeated with my little brother....

"I think of it so much, I can't do my work. I sit with a book in front of me asking myself, why did he have to be that way?

"It's hard to get into the social life here at City College. I like folk-singing, and I try to get in with the groups that do a lot of it. True, I'm not as good as they are, but they don't have to make it so apparent that they do not want me.

"How can I study if I feel nobody wants me around and I can't even have a decent social life?"

Parents' Need for Child's Achievement

Margaret's problem was that she regarded effort in studies as a test of her capacity and as a threat to her self-esteem. Deep-seated feelings of inferiority plagued her:

"My parents always had to have me get good marks.They were devastated unless I was on top of my class. It was as if their own reputations were at stake.

"As a result I can't face the possibility of my own mediocrity. If I don't study at all, I can't possibly do well. So I don't. This is less threatening to me. If I do study and then don't succeed, I won't have an excuse for failure or poor performance. So I'm better off not studying."

Reliance for Self-esteem on Parents' Attitudes

Obese, unkempt, untidily dressed, Mildred was unable to function.

"I feel tense and guilty because I'm failing, but I cannot work. I feel I'm letting my family down. I sit for hours doing nothing at all. Would you believe it? Just nothing. I don't even think. My mind's a blank....

"I think it is because they don't allow me my independence. I always think, 'What would my mother say?' 'How would my father like that?' I can't judge myself or what I am doing. It must always be through their eyes. I must satisfy them. And since I can't anyway, what's the use?"

Conclusion

Excerpts from group therapy sessions have been cited as evidence of intra-familial [redacted] concomitants of reading and study problems, highlighting personal difficulties which bedevil underachievers who are hung upon unresolved conflicts with parents. Whether or not these neurotic obsessions are rooted in reality, students who feel hemmed in by pressures welling from the past are left little psychic energy for the task of learning. They are immobilized, inhibited against dynamic intellectual striving, engrossed in debilitating self-involvement.

There is evidence that student-parent antagonisms tend to retain their potency full strength in subway-fed colleges where they are non-residential urbanites (1). Returning home each day, they are subject to reinforcement of habitual patterns of interaction with parents.

Group therapy offers an experience similar to dormitory "bull-session," strengthening relationship with peers and diminishing involvement with parents.

Interaction in the group often succeeds in effecting changes in these feelings. Harriet, for example, gradually became aware of the irrationality of retaliating in a way that was harmful to herself and was helped by this awareness to return to her former high-level academic performance. Leslie, however, resisted the realization that he was carrying the rejection pattern with him and projecting it on to others.

While protesting the need for independence, Mildred began to realize that she herself needed the dependency relationship; else she would already have escaped home pressure by going to an out-of-town college. She faced up to the insight that she herself had resisted the wrench from home and family.

She made some progress in combatting conflict between desire for independence and neurotic need for dependence which had immobilized her.

The interaction of the group to the feelings about family expressed by their peers was a dynamic source of help. The development of interest in others, of an understanding that each was not alone in their hostility to parents, that indeed, their aggressive feelings might not be unjustfied, opened the way to form new insights. The fact that a considerable number of participants eventually sought individual help gave evidence of progress from the original presenting problems.

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